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ONE YEAR OF HONOR SYSTEM IN OREGON

BY PHILIP E. BAUER,
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A great deal is being said of late about "The Oregon Honor System" or "Governor West's Honor System," referring to certain treatment of prisoners in the Oregon State Penitentiary. Many letters of inquiry are coming to us, asking us to define this much-talked-of policy. Representatives from the press from all parts of the country are frequent visitors, snapping us from all sides and heaping upon us an avalanche of questions relative to this system. At home and abroad we are called upon daily to define, analyze and explain what we mean by this method of dealing with prisoners.

I desire to meet your inquiry, which is a common one, and bring to you a little glimpse of this system as it is at work. It may prove a little disappointing to you if you have been over indulging your imagination. Or if you are inclined to idealism, it may cause you to heave a heavy sigh. It may, however, be the means of awakening your sympathy and giving you a better understanding of the great problem of dealing with prisoners, which has taxed the ingenuity of statesmen and social students for ages.

In the first place, it must be confessed that it is a difficult matter to define what we mean by such a system. Of course we could evade the definition as the boy did who was asked to define life, and replied in his simplicity, "life is living." So we might say that our Honor System is simply putting men on their honor. It is part of that, whatever that means. To attempt the definition briefly and comprehensively, our honor system is that system of treatment of prisoners in which we recognize some of the dependable qualities of the men and put these men on honor to use these qualities in service for the state, and in which we substitute for kicks and frowning guns so far as we are able, other incentives to be somebody and to do something; thus attempting little new but putting new emphasis on the declaration in our state constitution which says, "Laws for the punishment of crime shall be founded upon the principle of reformation and not of vindictive justice," thus surely antagoniz-

ing the old primitive idea of repression and magnifying the newer idea of expression and unfolding of the latent powers found in every man, of loyalty, friendship and patriotism.

Most men are responsive and reflect in life and deed the treatment accorded them. If cruelly repressed, they come back with bitter antagonism. If hated, they hate back with fury. If trusted they trust. If honored, they respond with honor. If the state has to punish, and it surely does, it can do it with the hand of love, knowing that men will respond to such treatment, and knowing too that outlawry and open rebellion will be superseded by law observance and loyalty. Our system, then, recognizes that men are reflectors and that the expression of confidence on the part of the governor, superintendent, warden or other officers, as well as of public opinion, will be responded to by the prisoner. As he is appealed to by honor and sympathy rather than by fear and hate, he will try to be as good as possible, and if given a chance, will make good if possible.

It works. Of course we who know how it works, know that it does not always work. Some men are too weak to respond to the greatest confidences placed in them. Some men will try with all the possibilities of their soul and fail because of accident or because of bad environment. But, nevertheless, it works. It cannot help it. A thing that is right always works somehow, sometime, somewhere. Over two hundred men of the four hundred and fifty men under sentence here are trusties—out daily without guard, trusted to return at night, and honor bound to do a fair day's work. It is a fair sight to see over two hundred prisoners wending their way to work with only a foreman unarmed attending as sponsor for them. The honor system reaches over one hundred men on parole and conditional pardon. They report once a month or oftener their whereabouts and what they are doing. The honor system goes even further. Of the two hundred men still kept within the walls of the penitentiary, many are holding positions of responsibility and trust, and are honored in many ways. All, save the few who have proved unreliable, are honored by the privileges of attending the Saturday baseball game and the Tuesday evening moving picture show. Every man in the institution is honored with the advantages of night school, religious services, fresh air and work.

But it is not to be supposed that our honor system and our confidences have gone to seed. There is still a stern but kindly

discipline that prevails here. When honor is bestowed, we have a feeling that it ought to be returned in kind. A man much trusted surely is to be even more severely dealt with if he turns down such an offer. Our severest punishments are hanging up, stripes, "hog table" (as the boys call the third table), privileges denied and loss of "good time." There are now sixteen men in the "zebra row" (in stripes) who have sinned against prison grace.

Neither must it be assumed that the honor system is altogether a new system of treatment of the prisoner. While the Oregon State Penitentiary has had a bad reputation for severity in punishment, and in early days the practice was the reverse of the honor system, still for the past ten years there has been a growth to our present position. If this system is now thriving well, it must be remembered that the planting was in the past, and it is now, under the fostering care of our enthusiastic Governor West, coming to bloom.

Does it pay to waste our honor and sympathies on prisoners? Do they escape and break paroles? Yes, they do, but our proportion of escapes, notwithstanding the big percentage that are free to take to the tall timber whenever they may desire, is just about the same as it was in other years in this institution when men were guarded by cold steel, and is about the same as you will find it in other institutions to-day where fewer men are trusted outside of the walls. But the profit of the system is to be noted. Two camps of our boys are building good roads, that which Oregon needs most. All the state institutions located about Salem have been the special recipients of our honor system. New buildings and beautified grounds speak in no uncertain sounds the praise of this system. But above all the men themselves are being tried out for the coming honors of parole and for useful citizens, when they have passed the period of parole probation. Every man is a better man because he has been tried on honor and finds he is able to respond. This is the profit beyond dollars and cents.

It will last. The spirit of the thing will last even if the method and form pass away. If our prisons are to be true reformatory institutions, no other method can maintain. Men can only rise when down, by the helping hand that helps them to help themselves; vindictive kicks do not help them up, but send them down the slope. Most of our criminals have been kicked and repressed until they are knotted in body, mind and soul, but these same repressed ones

the more quickly respond to honor that is bestowed upon them. They cannot escape a genuine boost by being trusted and honored and respected as having some worth to society. But we must learn to substitute a genuine brotherly feeling for some of the effusive sentimentality—then we may hope for a more permanent result. With all its weaknesses, we believe this system has come to stay.

We are hoping still for better things. The Oregon State Penitentiary is a sociological experiment garden. For years we have been doing as other prisons, facing many difficulties, but we feel that the Oregon honor system is a fair flower that grows in this garden. If you will allow the extravagance of the figure, we think that we have out-Burbanked Burbank in our garden, but we are still pruning and cultivating for improvement.